

Handout:

The End of Literacy Tests: The Voting Rights Act of 1965

President Lyndon B. Johnson addressed the full Congress in special session on March 15, 1965, following an outbreak of deadly violence as civil rights leader Reverend Martin Luther King organized a voter registration march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama. Johnson, a Texan who had spent his career in the House of Representatives as a leader from a southern state, had the power and the moral high ground to change history.

Excerpts from President Lyndon Baines Johnson Speech, March 15, 1965

"I speak tonight for the dignity of man and the destiny of democracy.

...There is no Negro problem. There is no Southern problem. There is no Northern problem. There is only an American problem.

... every American citizen must have an equal right to vote. There is no reason which can excuse the denial of that right. There is no duty which weighs more heavily on us than the duty we have to insure that right. Yet the harsh fact is that in many places in this country men and women are kept from voting simply because they are Negroes.

Every device of which human ingenuity is capable, has been used to deny this right. The Negro citizen may go to register only to be told that the day is wrong, or the hour is late, or the official in charge is absent. And if he persists and, if he manages to present himself to the registrar, he may be disqualified because he did not spell out his middle name, or because he abbreviated a word on the application. And if he manages to fill out an application, he is given a test. The registrar is the sole judge of whether he passes this test. He may be asked to recite the entire Constitution, or explain the most complex provisions of state law.

... Wednesday, I will send to Congress a law designed to eliminate illegal barriers to the right to vote... There is no Constitutional issue here. The command of the Constitution is plain. There is no moral issue. It is wrong--deadly wrong--to deny any of your fellow Americans the right to vote in this country.

...But even if we pass this bill the battle will not be over. What happened in Selma is part of a far larger movement which reaches into every section and state of America. It is the effort of American Negroes to secure for themselves the full blessings of American life. Their cause must be our cause too. Because it's not just Negroes, but really it's all of us, who must overcome the crippling legacy of bigotry and injustice. And we shall overcome."